

Laura McLary

Where Do Comics Belong?
Change of Location, Austrian Comics, and Anna-Maria Jung's
Xoth!—die unaussprechliche Stadt (2008)

ÜBERKREUZUNGEN INTERSECTIONS

Verhandlungen kultureller, ethnischer, religiöser
und geschlechtlicher Identitäten in österreichischer
Literatur und Kultur

Negotiations of cultural, ethnic, religious,
and gender identities in modern Austrian
Literature and Culture

Recently, an article by Hillary Chute entitled “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative” appeared as a contribution to a recurring column of *Publications of the Modern Languages Association*, “The Changing Profession,” indicating a “significant change of location” (Demetz 52) — a phrase I will return to throughout this presentation — in how we scholars of literature are writing about and teaching graphic narratives. When Art Spiegelman received a Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1992 for his graphic narrative, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (published between 1980 and 1991), it was as if a seal of legitimacy had been stamped on a medium commonly referred to as “comics.” But at the same time the necessity of creating a “special award” category indicated that the graphic narrative still escaped a more specific classification. And the fact that I’m presenting on a panel entitled “Genre—Krimis, Detektive und ‘Graphische Narrative’,” the latter in scare quotes — irony? — might demonstrate that the question remains open: Where does the graphic narrative live?

So let’s try to clear things up a little. Comics of whatever length and distinguishable from cartoons, which are typically just a single panel, are a medium, not a genre. But within the comics medium, there are a multitude of genres. The book-length “graphic novel” or “Comic-Roman” has received a lot of attention lately. But comic artists typically dance around the term so as to avoid it or pronounce it with a decided look of distaste on their faces, and perhaps with good reason because it too is a bit of an imprecise term since many works stamped as graphic novels are in fact autobiographies or family histories, memoirs and historical documentation, biography, or fantasy, and any number of hybrid forms of those. Many comic artists also object to the term because it suggests an attempt to find a more gentrified address for what is more commonly referred to as a comic book. Of course, we do know where a comic book lives: In the low-rent district. For these reasons, I prefer to use the term graphic narrative for book-length comics, which allows the borders to stay open and is more in keeping with the hybrid text-image nature of the medium.

Works by German-language comic artists have yet to gain the same status in the scholarship on German-language authors as that afforded their peers in English. There is however an active, though small comic scene developing in Austria, primarily in Vienna, Linz and Graz, parallel to centers of comic culture in Hamburg and Berlin in Germany. In fact, comic artists in Vienna have their own *Stammtisch* at the Café Rüdigerhof on the second Wednesday of each month. Yet with an undeniably Austrian air of fatalism, members of the comic community here speak of Austria as a „'Grenzland der Comic-Welt“ or „'Österreich ist der Kongo, was die Comics betrifft. Wir sind hier die fünfte Welt'.“¹ (And could the Austrian Web site “comicsel.at” convey this same idea more simply than it does?) To complicate matters, Peter Demetz, in an essay from 2000 entitled “Commuting to Klagenfurt,” muses on recent works of Austrian literature, which do not take place in Austria. He finds it noteworthy that all of these works have a “significant change of location” (52) at their core.

These compelling spatial images of the comic scene in Austria and perhaps the significance of plots, which do not take place in Austria, present an opportunity to explore how space and time are configured and/or disconfigured in graphic narratives by three Austria comic artists: Anna-Maria Jung's *Xoth! — die unaussprechliche Stadt* (2008), Ulli Lust's *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens* (2009), and Leopold Maurer's *Miller & Pynchon* (2009). I will briefly describe all three works with regard to a spatial tendency the three of them share, but the primary focus of my talk will be on Jung's *Xoth*, which won the prize for best comic book by a professional at the NEXTCOMIC Festival in Linz in 2009.²

¹ Melina Cichon, *Die kulturelle Akzeptanz der Comics in Österreich: Eine Untersuchung der österreichischen Comic-Kultur*. Master's thesis. Institut für das künstlerische Lehramt der Akademie der Bildenden Künste Wien. 2008. 119.

² “Bis auf wenige private Initiativen, wie zum Beispiel den Comicstammtisch im Rüdigerhof in Wien, gibt es in Österreich kaum Plattformen für ZeichnerInnen. Treffpunkte und Austausch unter den Akteuren fehlen. Mit dem NEXTCOMIC Festival wurde ein Ort geschaffen an dem sich ZeichnerInnen aus Österreich begegnen konnten, und dadurch wurde genau dieser fehlende Austausch ermöglicht. Aber auch der sehr wichtige und oft vergessene Kontakt zwischen den KünstlerInnen und dem Publikum wurde beim Festival hergestellt. So konnten

At the beginning of Jung's 74-page, color comic narrative, *Xoth! — die unaussprechliche Stadt*, the protagonist, Jacop O'Damsel is abruptly dislocated from his human reality to a Lovecraftian monster world, which exists outside the normal geographical, spatial, and synchronic rules of the human world. In a humorous, satirical reversal of the typical aliens-vs.-humans story, Jacop becomes the object of disgust and wonder. Lust's *Heute ist der letzte Tag vom Rest deines Lebens* similarly involves a change of location, minus the fantasy elements. In this lengthy autobiographical misadventure story, Ulli, a seventeen-year-old Austrian punker, hitchhikes to Sicily. After she gets separated from her friends on the road, Ulli's rough exterior is little protection against a social order, which treats her as an outsider. Maurer's *Miller & Pynchon* specifically thematizes change of location; it follows the main characters, Miller and Pynchon (named for the American authors), as they work through a geographical no-man's land to draw a line of demarcation between north and south. In common among these three works is therefore a "significant change of location," resulting in a continuous state of liminality in a borderland. In each narrative, one is left with a provisional ending. Jung provides for example a tongue-in-cheek Hollywood ending for *Xoth*, when Jacop O'Damsel — with apologies to Stanley Kubrik — learns to stop worrying and love being a monster.

Anna-Maria Jung, who was born in 1984 in Graz, graduated from the Fachhochschule Salzburg in 2007 with a focus on multi-media art after completing her *Diplomarbeit* entitled "Die Kreation einer fantastischen Welt basierend auf HP Lovecrafts 'Cthulhu-Mythos'." Jung is currently studying in New York City as a Fulbright scholar, where she is earning a master's degree in illustration at the Fashion Institute of Technology. Not surprisingly, she maintains a Web site, a blog, and a Facebook page, and much of her comics and her animation work were originally published on-line.

Here is Jung's synopsis of *Xoth's* plot from an interview she gave at the Frankfurter Buchmesse in 2008:

interessante Kontakte geknüpft, Ideen ausgetauscht und konstruktiv diskutiert werden" (Flugblatt für NEXTCOMIC Festival 2009 in Linz 7).

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Es ist in Prinzip die klassische Geschichte: Monster kommen in unsere Welt und tun schlechte Dinge [...] blah, blah, blah. Ich habe das Prinzip der umgekehrten Welt genommen, und in meiner Geschichte gibt es diese Welt voller Monster, die Lovecraft Monster, und ein Mensch dringt in diese Welt ein. und wird quasi von den Satanisten [...] beschworen, sie heißen aber Humanisten, sie verehren Menschen, und sie beschwören einen, und [...] in dieser Welt versucht er herauszufinden, ob man hier ist und muss dauernd von irgendwelchen böartigen Kreaturen weglaufen.³

Early in the narrative, Jacop meets a goat-girl, Yen Niggurath, who saves him from the Humanisten. Together they escape from the hitmen of the grotesque Cthulhu, and end up meeting a Yith named Nug-Sath, who long ago stole Lovecraft's soul, so that the highly intelligent monster could learn about the human world. Lovecraft in the Yith body urges Jacop to go back in time and space to force the Yith to return to his own body, and in turn, Lovecraft can return to his own body and dimension. It just so happens, Jacop finds Lovecraft on his deathbed. As the re-transfer takes place, Lovecraft dies, and Jacop returns to Yen, with whom he has fallen in love. When Cthulhu pronounces Jacop "harmlos," he is placed in an exhibit in his natural environment, i.e. a typical New England house from Lovecraft's era. A sign placed atop the house reads "See the Human Boy," and a Lovecraftian assortment of creatures ogle the exhibit with a mixture of curiosity and disgust, including a tentacled redhead, vaguely reminiscent of the author! Yen is there too and has apparently overcome her concern that a relationship with a human might be "pervers."

Jung's narrative is a mash-up of elements from Lovecraft's weird fiction stories, most of which he wrote in the 1920s, for example the mythology of the Cthulhu Cult, which he himself recycled in many of his stories. Lovecraft envisions a world that existed before human

³ Accessed 6 May 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8aJKMbRoRg>

time and is populated by hybrids: gigantic tentacled, winged, shrieking creatures, which ooze noisomely and are apparently intent on taking over the world at various intervals in time. Lovecraft's human characters are almost exclusively men, who have a close encounter with these creatures, and must fear not only for their sanity but also for their bodily integrity. Jung's narrative pokes fun at the earnestness of Lovecraft's weird tales by allowing the geographical dislocation to the monster world Xoth to reveal the essentially prosaic nature of its inhabitants: They are lustful, intent on revenge, lazy, murderous, greedy, power-hungry...just like human characters. Additionally, Jung can similarly poke fun at Lovecraft's repeated engagement with themes of horror and degeneracy, ultimately his fear of the hybrid — that is — the mixing, which takes place when so-called natural boundaries are erased. Jung explains her reason for demystifying the horrible thus:

Ich glaube, das was ich mit meiner Darstellung von Andersartigkeit aufs Korn nehme, ist die Tendenz des Menschen zur Schwarzweißmalerei, bzw. der Ernennung von Ikonen oder Feindbildern. Furcht ist menschlich, aber es ist wichtig, sich damit auf verschiedenen Ebenen auseinanderzusetzen: Das Andere ist auf bestimmte Weise genau so wie ich: Es liebt, es hat Träume, Ziele und Wünsche und es geht jeden Tag aufs Klo und wischt sich den Po aus, genauso wie wir. Deswegen ist meine Monsterwelt so „liebenswert“. Monster müssen ja auch wo leben. (Email from the author, 6 May 2010)

And the possibility of giving monsters a place to live might have something to do with the hybrid nature of comic narratives in comparison to textual narratives and the resultant multiple modes of reading the graphic narrative creates. The spatial arrangement of text and image on a page invites a non-synchronic or elliptical method of understanding the narrative. Readers will often flip back and forth between pages while reading, sometimes focusing on text, then on image, resulting in an interruption or a suspension of the narrative

thread. Comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics* 1993) points out that the gutters, the empty space between the frames, allow for, literally, reading between the lines. Things happen over time and through space in those supposedly empty spaces, which the reader must reconstruct in order to establish a narrative relationship between frames. Thus the reader must work at “decoding” (Chute) a comic narrative by, for example, imaging the non-represented and the unspoken between the frames.

Thus, as a graphic narrative, *Xoth! — die unaussprechliche Stadt* is itself a hybrid creature. Jung borrows from numerous sources, from Lovecraft to science fiction to Escher drawings to Hollywood to comic clichés. Jung complicates this pastiche effect by turning the expected on its head. Far from simply thematizing the experience of dislocation or “significant change of location” in its content or plot details, the graphic narrative achieves multiple modes of interface between form and content. If anything, one would need to speak of “scenarios” (to borrow a term from Marwan Kraidy’s scholarship on hybridity) to consider a greater variety of complex relationships between text and image and how both text and image are self-reflective of and in conflict with the narrative. Jung’s narrative makes both textual and pictorial references, which reach outside the narrative itself and thus create a rich set of new relationships. For example, Jung disrupts the typically gendered love-story/damsel-in-distress narrative. As Jung relates:

“Ich liebe es, die Geschlechterrollen umzukehren. Ich hab genug von weiblichen „Damsel in Distress“, von starken, männlichen Helden die unfähige Frauen retten müssen. [...] Ich liebe Kick-Ass Frauen (in dem Fall Yen) und männliche Antihelden. Aber ich mag es auch, ihnen äußerlich kein eindeutiges Geschlecht zuzuweisen, weil ich nichts von Klischees halte” (Email from the author, 6 May 2010).

Through the character Jacop O’Damsel, Jung deliberately creates an androgynous male character, who is mistaken for a woman in the opening sequence of the narrative. After he is transported to Xoth.

Yen, the goat girl, must save him, and through his interactions with her, the reader learns that he enjoys knitting stuffed animals. Even the haircut Yen eventually gives him does little to bolster his masculinity, as Yen quickly rebuffs his awkward attempt to kiss her by laughing. A pairing between a Niggurath and human would be too perverse.

Similarly, the interplay of time and space in Jung *Xoth!* takes on a particularly playful, self-reflective guise. Jacop O'Damsel's travel to a different dimension and the visual representation of the monster world deliberately bend the rules of time and space, for example time travel or Escher-like images of staircases that go nowhere or refer to texts explicitly outside of the narrative. Jung for example puts words in Jacop's mouth, which refer outside the text and remind the reader how the representation of fantasy creatures and worlds is so fraught with problems:

Jacop: *Übrigens*: Wieso versteh ich euch eigentlich alle? Das ist wie einer dieser dummen Sci-Fi Filme, in denen die Sprachenvielfalt nicht berücksichtigt wird.

Yen: Ganz einfach: hier sprechen alle Allzunge und hören mit Allohr. Das ist notwendig bei so vielen Rassen.

Jacop: Also sowas wie der Babelfisch ohne Fisch. Hm? (34).

Or when Jacop pulls out his cell phone to take a picture of Azathoth, the nuclear chaos: "Na so ein Wunder, kein Empfang...aber die Kamera...in Filmen denkt nie jemand dran, ein Foto zu machen!" (36). Jung's narrative elements are clearly a reworking of Lovecraft's (evasive? paradoxical?) concept of time and space, which is unspeakable and indescribably monstrous, but she creates a thickness of image and text through her engagement with his texts and references outside the text by bringing to the fore the problem of how to represent the non-representable and how to say the unspeakable — in the end, the main goal of the graphic narrative.

In all three graphic narratives by Austrian authors Anna-Maria Jung, Ulli Lust and Leopold Maurer, the main characters are left in a suspended state as interlopers or outsiders, who are no longer able to go "back" where they came from. Although Jacop O'Damsel in Jung's

Xoth!—die unaussprechliche Stadt is given the opportunity to go back to his human reality, he decides that “back” actually means returning to the monster world, allowing himself to be fully defined as non-synchronic and non-belonging. In the monster world, he is the aberration, and his sense of place is radically reduced to a house bordered by a fence around a featureless yard, but love saves the day. “Das Universum liegt noch vor mir und ich bin nicht allein” (74) are Jacop’s thoughts as he drifts off to sleep in Yen’s lap. So maybe the happy ending is that comics represent indeed a free space or a “significant change of location” for an Austrian author, who — typical of the post-Cold War generation — doesn’t see herself as typically Austrian: “Ich sehe mich gerne unabhängig von dem ‘typischen Österreicherischen.’ [...] Die ‘österreichische’ Seele ist bei mir weniger zu finden. Vielleicht bin ich einfach zu optimistisch dafür” (email from the author, 6 May 2010).

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